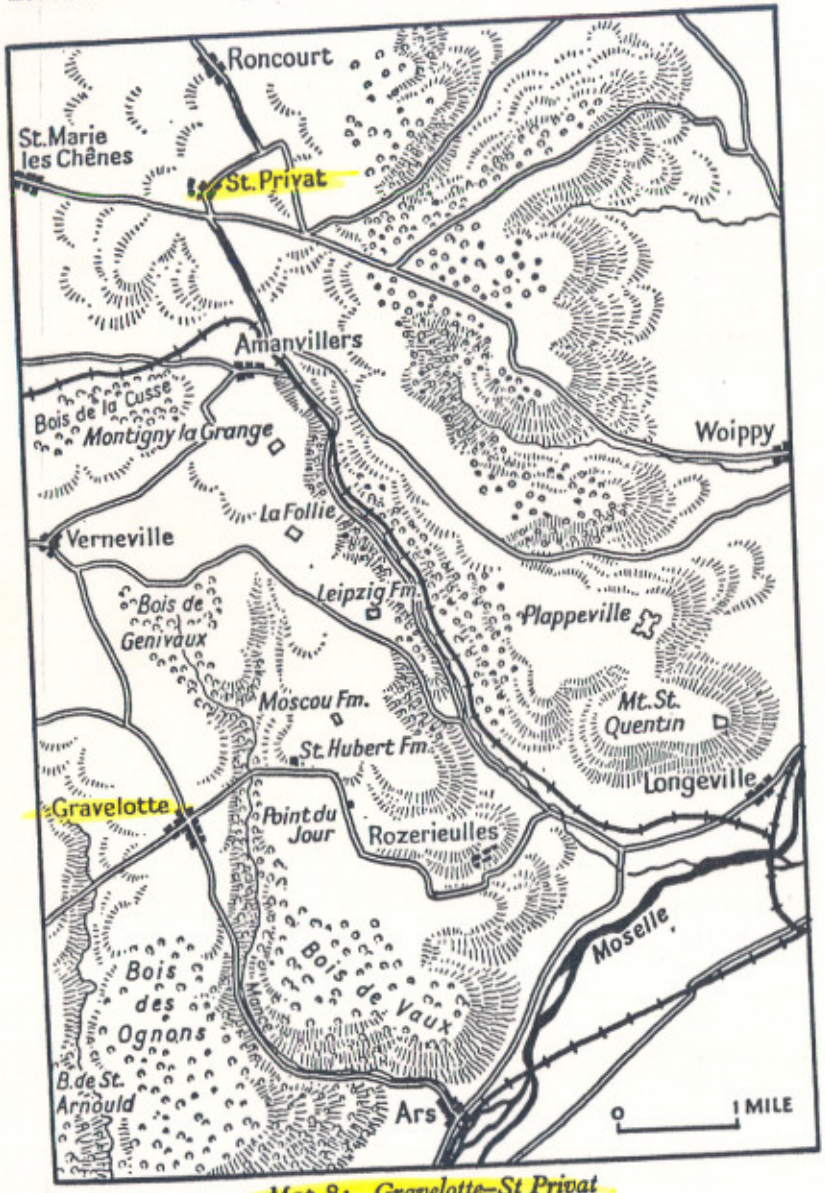
Moltke's good fortune now and throughout the campaign that he did not have to deal with an adversary capable of profiting by his mistakes.



Map 8: Gravelotte–St Privat

§3 Gravelotte–St Privat

The battle fought between Gravelotte and St Privat on 18th August differed from the previous engagements of the war, in kind as well as in scale. Not only was the bulk of both armed forces involved for the first time—the Germans engaged 188,332 men and 732 guns against 112,800 Frenchmen and 520 guns[1]—but the battle was deliberate and expected. The fighting at Spicheren, Froeschwiller, Colombey and Vionville had come as a surprise to the High Command on both sides, an interruption and distraction to totally different plans. The fighting at Gravelotte was deliberately willed by the Germans: Frederick Charles's orders for his army on 17th August were for it to "set out tomorrow morning towards the north to find the enemy and fight him"[2]; and it was awaited, if not immediately expected, by the French in positions which did credit to Bazaine's topographical skill and which he had some reason to consider impregnable.[3]

The left flank was particularly strong. Half a mile east of the village of Gravelotte the main road from Verdun to Metz crossed at right angles the deep ravine through which the Mance stream ran south between steep and thickly wooded slopes to join the Moselle at Ars. The gradient of these slopes and the bushes thickly covering them provided a formidable barrier to any army moving in close formation, while the road, as it rose eastward out of the ravine between a line of poplars which military artists were soon to make famous throughout the world, ran through deep cuttings and was commanded throughout most of its length by the walled farm of St Hubert, towards which it climbed in a dead straight line. Along the crest to the east of the ravine there lay three other farms —Leipzig, Moscou, Point du Jour: strongpoints commanding the fields above the Mance ravine, loopholed and barricaded by the French and connected by lines of trenches and gun-emplacements from which the French infantry and artillery commanded the long slopes before them. Frossard's 2nd Corps held the southern half of this front, based on Point du Jour, with Lapasset's brigade of 5th Corps guarding the

[1] *Kriegs. Einzelschr.* XI 675.
[2] Frederick Charles, *Denkwürdigkeiten* II 225.
[3] In 1944 a few German training units were to use the same positions to hold up General Patton's Third American Army as it advanced through Lorraine. See H. M. Cole, "The Lorraine Campaign", *United States Army in World War II: European Theater of Operations* (Washington D.C. 1950) 151 ff.

extreme left flank towards Ars, while the northern half, from St Hubert to Leipzig, was in the conscientious hands of Lebœuf. Beyond Lebœuf's positions the character of the country changed. The Mance ravine levelled out, the woods on its slopes spreading into the thick Bois des Genivaux, whose copses lapped up to the right flank of 3rd Corps's positions at the farm of La Folie. Beyond the Bois des Genivaux to the north there stretched wide open fields, virtually without cover, rising very gently eastwards towards the positions held by 4th and 6th Corps which were based respectively on the villages of Amanvillers and St Privat. For the *chassepot* and the *mitrailleuse* nothing could have been better; perhaps indeed it was the protection afforded by these long fields of fire that made Ladmirault and Canrobert feel excused from digging themselves in as elaborately as Lebœuf and Frossard were doing on their left.[1]

The weakness of the army's position, as we have seen, was on the right flank at St Privat; for, although the village commanded the surrounding slopes, there was nothing to prevent it from being outflanked from the north. It was not the position which Bazaine had chosen himself for his right flank, and during the course of 18th August he sent Canrobert orders to retire on a better one in rear which had been reconnoitred that morning by one of his staff. Perhaps the fact that he had already ordered such a withdrawal partly masked from Bazaine, at the end of the day, the full extent of Canrobert's collapse. But the position of his own headquarters, two miles behind the left wing at Plappeville and some four miles away from St Privat, with the Guard in reserve under his hand, was to add to the fatal weakness of his right wing.

The Germans knew all about the French positions south of Point du Jour, where Lapasset's brigade had been skirmishing with the emasculated First Army in the Bois de Vaux throughout the 17th and the ensuing night; but about the rest they remained totally ignorant. On 18th August Frederick Charles ordered his army, massed between Mars-la-Tour and Rezonville, to march northwards in the closest possible formation—straight across the front of the French positions—and then see what happened. "Whether it will be eventually necessary to make a wheeling movement to the right or the left cannot be decided at present . . . it is now only a question of a short march of a few miles."[2] IX Corps,

[1] Hönig, *24 Hours of Moltke's Strategy* 65–7. *Guerre: Metz* III 166, 170. Canrobert was later to complain of the frustration he felt at not having a single *mitrailleuse* on ground so well adapted to their use. *Procès Bazaine* 224.

[2] Frederick Charles, *Denkwürdigkeiten* II 228–9.

the Hessian, was on the right; XII Corps (the Saxons) and the Guard, their columns tangling and overlapping, were on the left[1]; while the battle-scarred remnants of III and X Corps followed in close reserve. So dense a mass of men could hardly move unobserved. Lebœuf saw the dust-clouds rising into the cloudless sky at about 9 a.m., and informed Bazaine. Bazaine was uninterested. He was not going to be lured from his excellent positions into the unknown hazards of battle. Lebœuf was told to sit tight and await events; and the dense, vulnerable mass of Frederick Charles's army was left to march northwards undisturbed.

By 10 a.m. the Germans saw their way more clearly. The white tents of the French lines along the crest to the east could be seen stretching as far as Montigny-la-Grange, south of Amanvillers; beyond that visibility was too difficult and nothing could as yet be observed. Frederick Charles did not think that there was anything more to see: retaining his belief that most of the French army had already escaped, he presumed—as had Alvensleben two days earlier—that he was faced with a rearguard, whose flank he had now found.[2] At 10.15 a.m. therefore he turned his army inwards. IX Corps was to make for Verneville and, with the Guard in support, attack the French positions which could be seen on the slopes beyond.[3] But a quarter of an hour later, at 10.30 a.m., Moltke issued an order for an attack by both armies. Steinmetz was to attack the forces opposite him at Gravelotte, and IX Corps was to give battle as already ordered at Verneville; but the rest of the Second Army should sweep round in an enveloping movement from the north on the supposed French flank at Amanvillers.[4] Frederick Charles may or may not have been prepared to change his plans to accord with this directive, but almost simultaneously with Moltke's order came news which certainly made some change necessary. The French camp had been sighted at St Privat; it was evident that Frederick Charles had not yet got anywhere near the enemy flank. Aides-de-camp chased after IX Corps with orders to wait until the Guard and the Saxons had time to come up on their left to join the attack; but matters had already gone too far. Shortly before midday the Hessian artillery took post in the fields beyond Verneville and fired, into the French lines

[1] Frederick Charles altered the order of march of his army, at great inconvenience to his troops, to get the Guard in the centre of his battle-line, instead of the Saxons, whose reliability he distrusted. See Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, *Aus meinem Leben* (Berlin 1915) 267.

[2] Frederick Charles, *Denkwürdigkeiten* II 232.

[3] Ibid. 237. [4] *M.M.K.* 234.

a thousand yards ahead of them, the first shells of the battle of Gravelotte.[1]

The French guns responded at once.

> Everywhere [wrote a German officer], along the whole range, guns sent out flashes and belched forth dense volumes of smoke. A hail of shell and shrapnel, the latter traceable by the little white clouds, looking like balloons, which remained suspended in the air for some time after their bursting, answered the war-like greeting from our side. The grating noise of the *mitrailleuses* was heard above the tumult, drowning the whole roar of battle.[2]

Ladmirault's divisions rushed into position north and south of Amanvillers, abandoning in their hurry tents and haversacks which they were never to see again, and poured fire into the Hessian gun-line. Manstein pushed infantry forward to protect his gunners, but they were checked by *chassepot* fire to which their rifles could make no adequate response. The French were able to lunge forward and seize the four leading guns of the German line, while the rest hurriedly took post further back; and then the fighting between Ladmirault's and Manstein's men dwindled, for the afternoon, into an artillery duel in which the French infantry stoically endured the shellfire which, in spite of its noise and accuracy, did surprisingly little damage to their ranks, while the Hessians extended their gun-line and awaited the arrival of the Guard on their left and III Corps in their rear to enable them to renew the attack.[3]

At the first sound of IX Corps's artillery Moltke, back on the heights south of Flavigny, realised that his trap was being sprung prematurely, and sent Steinmetz a hurried message to prevent him from making it any worse. All that was happening, he said, was a minor action at Verneville, and there was no need for Steinmetz to act. When he did, he need not deploy much infantry: artillery was what was needed, to prepare the attack.[4] But the troops at Gravelotte were not, strictly speaking, Steinmetz's at all, although Steinmetz continued to behave as if they were: they were those of von Goeben's VIII Corps, which Moltke had removed from Steinmetz's direct control. On hearing the

[1] *Der 18 August 1870* 90–1. *Guerre: Metz* III 189, 194.

[2] Verdy du Vernois, *With the Royal Headquarters* 81.

[3] *Der 18 August 1870* 148–56. *Guerre: Metz* III 194–217, and Docs. annexes 244–75. The German Official History [*G.G.S.* I ii 37–41] claims that the Hessian infantry beat off repeated counter-attacks, but the French documents make no mention of these. A counter-attack is described by L. Patry, *La Guerre telle qu'elle est* 107–10, but this appears to have been launched later in the afternoon.

[4] *M.M.K.* 235.

guns from Verneville, VIII Corps had at once engaged.[1] Goeben pushed his leading brigade through Gravelotte and down into the Mance ravine, to attack the French lines so clearly visible at Moscou and Point du Jour. His artillery line was deployed north of Gravelotte, and soon VII Corps artillery came up to prolong it to the south. Within three hours he had well over a hundred and fifty guns, which, from noon until nightfall, never ceased pounding the French lines on the opposite slopes. Next day the Germans were able to inspect their handiwork.

> In the large heaps of ruins [wrote one of them], which without an interval extended from Point du Jour to Moscou, the defenders, especially in Moscou, lay all around, fearfully torn and mutilated by the German shell; limbs and bodies were blown from thirty to fifty paces apart, and the stones and sand were here and there covered with pools of blood. In Moscou and Point du Jour some French were found burnt in their defensive positions, and a large number of the wounded showed marks of the flames, which had destroyed both uniforms and limbs. All around there lay rifles and swords, knapsacks and cartridges, the remains of limbers which had been blown up, broken gun-carriages and wheels, and a large number of hideously torn and mangled horses.[2]

Yet all this availed the Germans nothing. The French remained in their main positions opposite Gravelotte until next day, and neither German shells nor German infantry could shake them. Every attempt to assault the French positions before Moscou and Point du Jour was easily repulsed. Only at St Hubert did the Germans score any success; and that outpost lay below the crest of the ridge out of sight of the main French lines, and was held by a single battalion. It fell to a concerted rush of some fourteen German companies shortly before 3 p.m. That was the high-water mark of the First Army's success. Further attempts to advance were checked by fire from Moscou and Point du Jour; on either side lay slopes too steep and too thickly wooded for manœuvre; so Goeben's men and those sent to reinforce them could only crowd precariously in the shallow haven of safety and create on the road behind them a congestion whose consequences were nearly catastrophic.

Steinmetz had for some hours been convinced that the French troops facing him across the Mance ravine were only a rearguard covering

[1] According to his biographer Goeben "setzte diesen Angriff in etwas hinhaltender Weise ins Werk, wie sie ihm der neuen Lage der Dinge zu entsprechen schien. Hierdurch kam es, daß General v. Steinmetz den Befehl zum Vorgehen des VIII. Armeekorps wiederholt und in ganz bestimmter Form zu ertheilen sich veranlaßt sah." Zernin, *Leben des Generals v. Goeben* II 56.

[2] F. Hönig, *24 Hours of Moltke's Strategy* 63. *Guerre: Metz III*: Docs. annexes 188–94.

a general retreat; now the fall of St Hubert seemed to indicate the beginnings of that disintegration of the enemy which every commander must unhesitatingly exploit.[1] Fired with the determination not to miss his chance, he gave orders whose rashness even now seems barely credible. The French position was still intact. It could be approached only along one narrow road, from which it was almost impossible to diverge, and which was already choked with the exhausted débris of VIII Corps. Along this Steinmetz now ordered forward the available infantry of Zastrow's VII Corps; all VII Corps artillery; and, a final wild touch, the First Cavalry Division, which was ordered to pursue the defeated enemy to the glacis of Metz.[2]

Of the artillery, four batteries reached St Hubert, where three deployed only to be knocked out one by one. Of the cavalry, only one regiment could make its way to St Hubert, and that rapidly disintegrated under French fire; the remainder were halted by the unimaginable shambles in the ravine.

> Picture to yourself [wrote an observer] a continuous wall of smoke, out of which the flames of Point du Jour and Moscou rose up to heaven, a hundred and forty-four guns in action in rear of the valley ... while in front were masses of infantry, cavalry, and artillery crowding into the ravine, some of them pressing on to the front, others falling back under pressure of the enemy's fire as the range got shorter, wounded and unwounded men, infantry in order and in disorder streaming in opposite directions and jumbled together, the echo of the shells as they burst in the wood or above the trees, the whistling of the bullets from either side as they rushed overhead, and over the whole a column of dust which darkened the sun.[3]

The cavalry wheeled to extricate itself from this mass. Riderless horses bolted, and there was a general surge back towards Gravelotte. By 5 p.m. it was clear that the First Army's attack had been a total failure. The whole German position on this front was at the mercy of a strong, well-timed French counter-attack.

Such a counter-attack did not for a moment enter Bazaine's mind. At Plappeville, by a freak of acoustics, it was extraordinarily difficult to hear the noise of battle, and in consequence he did not realise how violent a conflict was raging.[4] In any case, having chosen good positions for his forces, he felt his work to be over and that it was now up to his corps commanders to defend them.[5] These were the excuses which he

[1] *Der 18 August 1870* 272. [2] Hönig, op. cit. 110.
[3] Hönig, op. cit. 113. *Der 18 August 1870* 273 ff.
[4] *Procès Bazaine* 258. C. Fay, *Journal d'un officier de l'Armée du Rhin* 107.
[5] D'Andlau, *Metz, Campagne et Négociations* 88. Bazaine, *Épisodes* 105.

put forward in the apologias which he published after the war, and which did little to re-establish his reputation with the French army and nation. Nor was his statement to his judges any more convincing, that he was suffering a good deal from his wound, could not sit a horse, and "since 1st August had not had eight hours rest a day".[1] The latter disadvantage, after all, was one shared not only by his subordinates but by most of his enemies as well. But there can be little doubt that he was morally if not physically exhausted; that the weight of responsibility had paralysed him, annihilating all power of action and independence of will. Throughout the day he avoided the battlefield. When Lebœuf reported the advance of the enemy Bazaine told him to remain in his good positions and defend himself. When Jarras appeared and asked for orders, Bazaine sent him back with a petty administrative assignment. When Canrobert reported a threat to the right flank Bazaine only arranged for some artillery to be sent to help, and informed Canrobert that he intended the right flank to fall back in the near future.[2] When during the afternoon Bazaine finally left Plappeville, it was to go, not to the plateau which his army was defending, but in the opposite direction, to Mont St Quentin, to make sure that the batteries there were adequately sited to deal with the threat to his left flank which he obstinately continued to expect.[3] It is possible, though not easy, to find excuses for his behaviour: the French Official History does not try. His conduct, it says, "can best be compared with that of a simple soldier who abandons his post in face of the enemy."[4]

There was thus no directing intelligence on the French side to observe the disorder into which the German attack had fallen and to turn it to advantage. The rashness of the Germans was to go unpunished. But this by itself need not have led to a French defeat. On the left flank Frossard and Lebœuf were to maintain their positions unshaken until nightfall. It was on the right that the absence of an active commander was to prove fatal to the French hopes. Manstein's attack, as we have seen, had been been checked on the slopes beyond Verneville; but during the afternoon, while his infantrymen lay waiting their chance and his gunners pounded the French batteries, the rest of the Second Army was swinging round to come up on his left. Once they had passed Verneville and the copses of the Bois de la Cusse which had masked all observation to the north, the staff of the Second Army could see how

[1] *Procès Bazaine* 167. [2] Ibid. 224, 226, 277.
[3] Bazaine, *Épisodes* 105. *Guerre: Metz* III: Docs. annexes 105.
[4] *Guerre: Metz* III 692.

entirely erroneous their conception of the extent of the French positions had been. The white tents along the heights as far as St Privat showed that IX Corps had attacked, not the flank of the French army, but almost its precise centre; and that not merely the Guard but also the Royal Saxon Corps must be deployed if the enemy was to be outflanked. So Frederick Charles enforced caution not merely on IX Corps but on the Guard as well. Not even the French outposts in St Marie-les-Chênes, at the foot of the St Privat glacis, were to be attacked until the Saxons arrived. So the Guard, like the Hessians, took up fire-positions, deployed artillery, sniped at the French and waited for the Saxons to arrive.[1]

The Saxons came into the attack at about 3 p.m. and, assisted by the Guard and with plentiful use of artillery, took only about half an hour to drive the French defenders out of St Marie. Then the Guard's gun-line deployed south of St Marie, the Saxon to the north, the artillery of III Corps came to reinforce that of IX; and by 5 p.m. the French artillery, virtually driven from the battlefield, could do no more to protect the thick lines of infantry round St Privat from the concentrated fire of 180 German guns. As for St Privat itself, "the noise of explosions, combined with the horrible cracking of collapsing roofs and crumbling walls, the cries of the wounded mixed with the shrill whistle of bullets and the dull and impetuous shock of the shells and bombs turned the streets of the village into a splendid and horrible hell."[2] And the Saxon Corps, wisely avoiding the open slopes below the village, pushed northwards, towards the village of Roncourt, and thence round to the east, their cavalry to fan out into the lower Moselle valley and their infantry to fall on the unprotected flank of the defence.[3]

So far the attack of the Second Army, with the wise restraint of its infantry and its reliance on artillery fire while it manœuvred to find the enemy flank, might have been contrasted with Steinmetz's bloody and fruitless impetuosity as a model of how an attack should be conducted against a well-armed enemy in positions well adapted for defence. But at about 6 p.m. the commander of the Guard Corps, Prince Augustus of Württemberg, took a decision which was to make the name of St Privat even more tragic in German military annals than that of Gravelotte. His reasons are obscure. According to some accounts the sudden silence of the French guns led him to believe that Canrobert was

[1] *Der 18 August 1870* 166. Frederick Charles, *Denkwürdigkeiten* II 246.
[2] *Guerre: Metz* III: Docs annexes 357.
[3] *G.G.S.* I ii 64–5. *Guerre: Metz* III 457–63.

transferring his forces to Amanvillers to attack IX Corps. Others suggest that he mistakenly believed the Saxons to be in position and ready to attack; while the belief was widespread after the battle that simple partisan jealousy prompted him to pluck the laurels for the Prussian Guard before the Saxons could appropriate them.[1] Whatever the reason, he gave the order to advance without even ordering his artillery to give covering fire, and Frederick Charles, impatient at the Saxon delay, approved it. General von Pape, commander of the First Guards Division, who from his headquarters could see both that the Saxons were not yet remotely ready to launch their attack and that the French positions at St Privat bore no sign of damage by German artillery fire, protested strongly, but the prince cut him short and ordered him forward.[2] So the skirmishing lines of the Guard, with thick columns behind them, extended themselves over the bare fields below St Privat and began to make their way up the slopes in face of the French fire.

The result was a massacre. The field officers on their horses were the first casualties. The men on foot struggled forward against the *chassepot* fire as if into a hailstorm, shoulders hunched, heads bowed, directed only by the shouts of their leaders and the discordant noise of their regimental bugles and drums. All formation disintegrated: the men broke up their columns into a single thick and ragged skirmishing line and inched their way forward up the bare glacis of the fields until they were within some six hundred yards of St Privat. There they stopped. No more urging could get the survivors forward. They could only crouch in firing positions and wait for the attack of the Saxons, which they had so disastrously anticipated, to develop on their left flank. The casualty returns were to reveal over 8,000 officers and men killed and wounded, mostly within twenty minutes; more than a quarter of the entire corps strength. If anything was needed to vindicate the French faith in the *chassepot*, it was the aristocratic corpses which so thickly strewed the fields between St Privat and St Marie-les-Chênes.[3]

By 6 p.m. then, the French had met the German attack along the length of their front and had everywhere held firm. Their pre-war theorists had not been at fault when they had foreseen the unprecedented strength which modern weapons would lend the defence. If there was any weakening, it was the result of German artillery fire—

[1] Frederick Charles, *Denkwürdigkeiten* II 252–3. Moritz Busch, *Bismarck: Some Secret Pages of his History* I 97, 195.
[2] *Der 18 August 1870* 378–9.
[3] *Ibid.* 408–65. Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, *Aus meinem Leben* 284, and *Letters on Infantry* (London 1889) 51–2. *G.G.S.* I ii 127–35.

especially that of the Guard whose guns, cleverly directed by their commander Prince Kraft zu Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, broke up all French attempts to counter-attack between Amanvillers and St Privat;[1] and there can be little doubt that the tremendous pressure of the Guard's attack, heavy though the cost was to the atttackers, weakened Canrobert's troops and made easier the task of the Saxons. But it was not until the Saxon outflanking movement made itself felt that the French position began to crumble. North of St Privat Canrobert could spare only a handful of men to protect his right flank, and between 6 and 7 p.m. these troops could do no more than delay the Saxons' advance through Montois and Roncourt. By 7 p.m., as twilight was falling, they had been pressed back on St Privat; the Saxons were in Roncourt, and their guns were deployed, fourteen batteries strong, in a line almost at right angles to those of the Guard, which they joined in a concentrated bombardment of the blazing and crowded village.[2]

Canrobert, his artillery crushed and his infantry caught between two fires, had already decided that he must fall back. He warned Ladmirault on his left, sent a message asking Bourbaki to cover his retreat and asked Du Barail to put in a cavalry charge, to win a little time. The last manœuvre was hopeless: German fire broke up the charge before it had covered fifty yards; and there was little to check the Prussian Guard and the Saxons when, at 7.30 p.m. they charged cheering on to the disintegrating French position, fifty thousand strong, drums and bugles sounding and colours waving in the setting sun. There were about nine French battalions in the village, and some fifteen Prussian and Saxon battalions attacking. Some French units were retreating in good order, others had collapsed, a few remained firing in the burning houses. Not for an hour could any kind of order be established. Then the Germans found themselves in possession of the village, and the French were in full retreat down the Woippy road in a long straggling column, covered only by a few devoted battalions. The Germans were themselves too disorganised to pursue.[3]

Meanwhile Bourbaki had come up with the Imperial Guard—that élite reserve so carefully preserved by the French command that it had barely fired a shot since the beginning of the war. From the beginning of the battle Bourbaki had held his men in readiness behind the centre of the French front, waiting for an order from his listless commander-

[1] Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen, *Aus meinem Leben* 278–9. Patry, *La Guerre telle qu'elle est* 109 [2] *G.G.S.* I ii 138–46. *Guerre: Metz* III 508–76.
[3] *Guerre: Metz* III 519–24, and Docs. annexes 356–72. *G.G.S.* I ii 148–51.

in-chief. When earlier in the day Bazaine ordered him to send off a brigade to support Frossard, Bourbaki complied, but pointed out that it was unwise both to commit the reserve so soon and to commit it piecemeal. Bazaine's answer was typical: "You may either recall it or leave it there, as suits you best"; and no further message came from him for the rest of the day. For this abdication of the principal function of an army commander, the employment of his reserve, Bazaine later gave the curious explanation that Bourbaki, as commander of the reserve, had full powers to act as he thought best[1]—a statement on which comment is unnecessary. Bourbaki remained, anxious and inactive, behind the battlefront, without orders or information, until at about 6.15 p.m. two officers arrived from Ladmirault at Amanvillers to ask for help. Ladmirault had been counter-attacking to relieve the pressure on Canrobert and in so doing had suffered severely from German fire; but he suspected that the enemy opposite him was equally exhausted: the arrival of fresh troops might tip the scale. Bourbaki hesitated to answer this appeal. A suspiciously large number of stragglers seemed to be wandering back from 6th Corps front; he could see through his telescope signs of a battle raging round St Privat; and if the right flank was in danger, he was the only person who could retrieve it. But Ladmirault's messengers were urgent and convincing. Bourbaki yielded, and set off with one division along the road towards Amanvillers.[2]

The progress of the battle was masked from Bourbaki, as he advanced, by thick woods from which he emerged on to the plateau at about 6.45 p.m. Then he could see that his fears were realised. From St Privat a thick crowd of fugitives was pouring down the road, blocking the path of the guardsmen and shaking even their imperturbable discipline. Bourbaki turned on his guide and cursed him furiously in words drearily typical of the French generals of the time. "You promised me a victory," he stormed, "now you've got me involved in a rout. You had no right to do that! There was no need to make me leave my magnificent positions for this!" Boiling with rage, he turned his column about and began to canter away from the battlefield.[3] The result of such prima donna behaviour was disastrous. The sight of the Guard apparently in confusion and retreat not only confirmed the fears of the fugitives from 6th Corps, but panicked a section of 4th Corps as

[1] *Procès Bazaine* 167.
[2] Ibid. 282.
[3] Ibid. 233, 282. *Guerre: Metz* III 496–8 and Docs. annexes 452–3.

well. By the time Bourbaki had collected himself, the Guard was out of control and nothing would halt them. They dissolved into retreat just as the last resistance of 6th Corps collapsed, and Bourbaki could only deploy his artillery to discourage the German pursuit.[1]

Thus Ladmirault, so far from receiving support, found his right flank laid bare. There was nothing he could do but withdraw 4th Corps as well, in such order as he could manage, with the Germans pressing on his heels. Darkness made it possible for him to get away, but equally made it impossible for him to check the retreat from developing, like that of 6th Corps, into a disorderly flood of men, waggons and horses down the narrow road to Woippy and Metz.[2]

The French retreat from St Privat, however, was a precise and disciplined withdrawal in comparison with the collapse of the Germans which simultaneously occurred the other end of the front, before Gravelotte. There nothing could be done to retrieve Steinmetz's mistakes. By 5 p.m. forty-three Prussian companies were massed around St Hubert, drawn from seven separate regiments, entirely unable to advance.[3] Troops sent up to support the attack lost all cohesion as they passed through the chaos of the ravine, and their arrival merely swelled the confusion. Steinmetz's own reserves were almost exhausted; but General von Fransecky's II Corps, which had only just caught up with the advancing army, was beginning to appear in huge compact columns of fresh troops, and Steinmetz appealed to Royal Headquarters for permission to use them as well.[4] The King was at Gravelotte. He had come forward from Flavigny on receiving a totally erroneous message from Steinmetz that the heights had been carried. Now, at 7 p.m., he sanctioned a renewal of the attack on the grounds "that now, as the heights had once been carried, and then lost, everything must be done to get possession of them again". Moltke expressed disagreement only by chilly silence: he knew better than to contradict two choleric septuagenarians at the height of a battle; and as II Corps came up to the battlefield Steinmetz ordered the protesting Goeben to attack with his last reserves.[5]

[1] *Guerre: Metz* III: Docs. annexes 462–7.

[2] Ibid. 545–8 and Docs. annexes 430, 398. D'Andlau, *Metz, Campagne et Négociations* 96.

[3] Hönig, *24 Hours of Moltke's Strategy* 127.

[4] A. von Schell, *Operations of the First Army* (English edn. London 1873) 131. Hönig, op. cit. 133–7.

[5] Verdy du Vernois, *With the Royal Headquarters* 84–5. *Der 18 August 1870* 302. Zernin, *Leben des Generals v. Goeben* II 63. Moltke himself was to admit in his digest of the Official History: "It would have been better if the Chief of Staff, who was personally on the field at the time, had not allowed this movement at so late an hour. A body of troops, still completely intact, might have been of great value the next day; it was not likely this evening to affect the issue." Moltke, *The Franco-German War* (London 1891) I 78.

The French at Point du Jour had seen the helmets of II Corps gleaming in the evening sun as they advanced over the Gravelotte plain, and knew what to expect. As the Prussians attacked, the whole firing-line sprang into life, and Steinmetz's last onslaught was met by fire at point-blank range.[1] The German infantry reeled back; in the ravine some of the horses crammed on the narrow road began to bolt; and suddenly the tension which had sustained the Germans snapped altogether. Squadrons of cavalry, teams of gun-horses went careering back through Gravelotte, and the infantry, too long patient under the French shells, ran shrieking with them in a ragged howling mass out of the ravine, through the flame-lit village streets under the astounded eyes of their Supreme War Lord, shouting "We are lost!" Staff officers, the King himself, weighed in cursing with the flat of their swords, but the flood of men swept on to Rezonville before it halted. The panic swept round the German rear; a line of retreat was reconnoitred for the King.[2] Now if the French had attacked, if they had had cavalry on hand, they might have thrown the First Army into disorder, and isolated the Second. But no attack was made. On the French side only one brigade seems to have known of the German repulse, and Jolivet, its commander, wrote in his report: "I did not think I should pursue them, having been ordered to remain on the defensive." Such an army does not deserve victory.[3]

The horrors of the Mance ravine had still not been exhausted. Against the tide of panic II Corps was beginning to advance into action. No deployment was possible in the ravine and both divisions of the Corps advanced *en bloc*. Beyond the ravine deployment was easier, and a few units brought their fire to bear on the dark masses of what they took to be the French ahead. But they were not the French: they were the remainder of VII and VIII Corps still holding firm round St Hubert, and at this sudden volley out of the darkness their precarious

[1] Nearly all German sources speak of a French counter-attack, but there is no evidence of this in the French documents. At most a few units made limited lunges at the Germans immediately before them. See, e.g. *Guerre: Metz* III: Docs. annexes 96, 101.

[2] *Kriegsgesch. Einzelschr.* XIX, *König Wilhelm auf seinem Kriegszuge in Frankreich* 43–4. *Der 18 August 1870* 307. Hönig, op. cit. 140–43. Verdy du Vernois, op. cit. 88. F. von Rauch, *Briefe aus dem grossen Hauptquartier* (Berlin 1911) 54.

[3] *Guerre: Metz* III: Docs. annexes 103.

control also collapsed. Of the confusion that followed no coherent account is possible: they "fell to pieces like a house of cards and poured to the rear in a wild panic, rushing, shouting, and quite out of their senses, to an extent indeed which has seldom happened in the history of war." II Corps could do no more than take over the positions they abandoned and sound the cease-fire, to stop any further mutual slaughter. At 9.30 p.m. the battle on this part of the front also came to an inglorious end.[1]

The King and his staff rode slowly back to Rezonville. There, while orderly officers tried to find them lodgings in the tiny houses already overflowing with wounded and administrative troops, they stood round a bonfire discussing what to do next. There was little cause for satisfaction with the day's work. The First Army had clearly suffered crippling losses, and its morale was severely shaken. From the Second Army nothing had been heard for several hours. The French line was apparently intact. In the royal entourage the view was frankly expressed, that the German armies had reached the end of their tether; and it was only on Moltke's insistence that the King gave the order to renew the attack next day. Not until after midnight did Moltke learn from Frederick Charles that the French right wing had collapsed and that the day was won.[2]

Next morning, even when the French were found to have slipped away, there was little feeling of victory. The slaughter had been too great, and it was clear that the Germans had suffered most. The King was overwhelmed by the reckless squandering of his Guard, and when Bismarck declared that "people are fed up with Steinmetz's butchery" he was voicing an opinion being generally expressed in still more forcible terms. "I have given up asking after friends", commented Verdy, "as I get to each question no other answer than 'dead' or 'wounded'." Roon, who had to find the replacements, was particularly appalled. "We have too few officers even in peacetime!" he lamented.[3]

[1] Kunz, *Kriegsgeschichtliche Beispiele aus dem deutsch-französischen Kriege von 1870–71* I. *Das Nachtgefecht vom 18 August 1870*, (Berlin 1897) 83–94. Hönig, op. cit. 127, 156. Zernin, *Leben des Generals v. Goeben* II 265. Bronsart and Verdy both believed II Corps attack to have succeeded, and Bronsart, according to his own account, rode back to Royal Headquarters shouting: "Die Schlacht ist gewonnen, das II Armeekorps hat die Höhe 'tambour battant' gestürmt und den Feind nach Metz hinuntergeworfen!" Bronsart, *Kriegstagebuch* 45. Verdy du Vernois, *With the Royal Headquarters* 91–2.

[2] Verdy du Vernois, *War Diary* 65. Bamberger, *Bismarcks Grosses Spiel* 173.

[3] Frederick III, op. cit. 94. Roon, *Denkwürdigkeiten* III 193. F. von Rauch, *Briefe aus dem Grossen Hauptquartier* 56, 61–2.

The First Army alone had lost 4,219 men, while the casualties of the French units opposing it—2nd Corps, and 3rd and 4th Divisions of 3rd Corps—totalled only about 2,155.[1] The Guard as we have seen lost over 8,000. The official German figure of losses is 20,163 officers and men; Bazaine's return, incomplete and approximate, totalled 12,273.[2] Only Moltke seemed unmoved as he viewed the carnage, and as he drove back to Pont-à-Mousson next day he made only one singularly inappropriate comment. "I have learned once more", he murmured, "that one cannot be too strong on the field of battle."[3]

On 19th August Bazaine took stock of his position.

> The troops are tired with these endless battles [he wrote plaintively to Napoleon], which do not allow them to recover (*ne leur permettent pas les soins matériels*); they must be allowed to rest for two or three days. . . . I still reckon to move northwards and fight my way out via Montmédy on the Ste Ménéhould–Châlons road, if it is not too strongly occupied; if it is, I shall go on through Sedan and Mézières to reach Châlons.[4]

That the Germans might interfere with these plans does not seem to have entered into his calculations. If the French troops needed rest and reorganisation, rest and reorganisation they must have. So on 19th August the Army of the Rhine, weary but by no means defeated, fell back into positions under the fortress of Metz. Its active part in the war was over.

It is tempting to rank the double battle of Rezonville-Gravelotte among the decisive engagements of the Western world; not because of what occurred during its course but because of what failed to occur. The strategic and tactical errors committed by the German commanders were so considerable that at the hands of a reasonably competent adversary they might have suffered, both on 16th August and on 18th August, an absolute defeat. Such a defeat might not have changed the ultimate outcome of the struggle, but the effect on belligerent morale and neutral opinion could have been sufficiently profound to alter the whole character of the war and of the peace which followed it. For these errors Moltke was only in part to blame: the main responsibility for misjudging the position of the French army both on 16th August

[1] *G.G.S.* I ii. App. XXIV. I take these figures in preference to the slightly lower ones in *Kriegsgesch. Einzelschr.* XI, which omit certain subsidiary skirmishes. *Guerre: Metz* III: Docs. annexes 94.

[2] *G.G.S.* I ii. App. XXIV. *Guerre: Metz* III: Docs. annexes 79.

[3] Verdy du Vernois, op. cit. 101.

[4] Bazaine, *Épisodes* 107–8. See p. 189 below.

and on 18th August, and thus exposing first III Corps to annihilation and then the Second Army to a flanking attack, must lie with Frederick Charles. Even when the French failed, through the strict passivity of their defence, to exploit either of these opportunities, they were given one more chance by Steinmetz, who flung away his army in the Mance ravine and left the most vulnerable flank of the German forces open to counter-attack; while at lower levels of command the recklessness with which the Prussian infantry was squandered in frontal attacks in close order against an enemy entrenched in strong positions and armed with a far superior rifle, on the orders of commanders in no position to appreciate what they were asking their men to do, foreshadowed with horrible accuracy the worst of the fighting in the First World War. The fault of the French lay in failing to follow their successful defensive with a resolute attack. The indictment against Bazaine is not that he lost the battles of Rezonville and Gravelotte: it is that he failed to win them when victory lay within his grasp.

CHAPTER V

The Army of Châlons

§1 Beaumont

NAPOLEON, in a third-class railway carriage, reached Châlons on the evening of 16th August, and there, as he expected, he found his second army in course of formation. Palikao had laboured heroically. The three right-wing corps of the old Army of the Rhine, 1st, 5th and 7th, were coming in by train from Chaumont and Belfort, and their depleted ranks were being filled up with recruits from the class of 1869. The new 12th Corps was there, under Trochu; one of its divisions formed of good regular troops from the Spanish frontier, one of Marines who could no longer be used for landing in Germany, and one of newly joined, untrained men. Armaments were also arriving in more than adequate quantity. By 21st August, when it set out on its brief and disastrous campaign, the Army of Châlons, under the command of MacMahon, totalled 130,000 men, with 423 guns; a remarkable testimony to the traditional powers of improvisation of which the French army was justly so proud.[1]

In spite of all this activity, Napoleon cannot have found the sight encouraging. The regular troops, broken by battle or wearied by their long retreat, sprawled about in haggard exhaustion, deaf to the commands of their officers. "It was an inert crowd," wrote one observer, "vegetating rather than living, scarcely moving even if you kicked them, grumbling at being disturbed in their weary sleep."[2] The new blood infused into this sluggish body consisted of raw recruits or depôt troops, hardly able to march in step and quite unable to load or fire their weapons. During the few days spent at Châlons it was impossible even to begin turning them into soldiers, and in the halts on their subsequent marches every available moment had to be devoted to training.[3] Finally there were the eighteen battalions of the *Garde Mobile* of the

[1] *Guerre: Armée de Châlons* I 4–17.
[2] D'Hérisson, *Journal of a Staff Officer* 18.
[3] *Guerre: Armée de Châlons* I: Docs. annexes 104–5.